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Pragmatic Visionary: The Prescriptions of American Independent Filmmaker John Sayles

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the exploration and analysis of the style, themes and issues of American independent filmmaker John Sayles.

Up until the time of writing (2001) Sayles has made and released twelve feature length films and from this oeuvre I have chosen eight films for analysis: ***Baby, It's You*** (1983); ***The Brother From Another Planet*** (1984); ***Matewan*** (1987); ***Eight Men Out*** (1988); ***City of Hope*** (1991); ***Passion Fish*** (1992); ***Lone Star*** (1996); and ***Limbo*** (1999).

Having selected these films as the focus of my research I will then ask the following questions:

- ◆ Are there consistencies in themes, issues and characters in Sayles films?
- ◆ If the answer to the above is yes:
 - What are the salient characteristics of these consistent features?
and
 - Do the salient characteristics of these consistent features indicate a particular authorial worldview, if you will, a Sayles' Weltanschauung?

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Last, but not least, I wish to thank the person without whom this thesis would not have been possible, John Sayles. He is an extraordinary filmmaker. He is able to imbue his richly textured work with integrity and entertain at the same time, and were it not for this my task would have been an onerous one, rather than the pleasure it has been.

Preface

Why John Sayles?

In 1996 I attended the Rialto Cinema Complex in Auckland in order to view what was then John Sayles latest film, *Lone Star*. I came away determined to see the film again, fascinated by the relationships it dealt with, by its focus on the importance and burdens of history, and by the way in which it wove together what appeared, initially, to be a myriad of stories, as opposed to one. I also appreciated the number of fully fleshed-out minor characters who appeared in the film. Last, but definitely not least, I was fascinated that a movie, set on the other side of the world, viz. in Texas, was dealing with some of the same issues that we were ourselves confronting in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Sayles' name was not immediately familiar to me; it was not until later that I realised that he was the screenwriter/director/editor of another complex film that I had enjoyed immensely some years before, a movie called *Passion Fish* (1992). My interest aroused, I made a point of viewing as many of his films as possible and it was not long before I realised that I wanted to learn more about the man and his work.

As I viewed his films, I discovered that I identified with many of the personal, social and political views expressed in them and, more importantly, that I was interested in many of the questions they raised. Possibly because I was born in the same decade as Sayles (the 1950s) I felt an affinity with his apparent perspective on life and the world. Having spent some time as a counsellor, I was interested in his 'take' on personal history and his recognition that people can allow it to dominate their present and their future. I also enjoyed the fact that contrary to popular Hollywood convention, here was a director making films aimed at adults, complicated multi-perspective films, rather than ones intended for the adolescent multiplex audience. These were films for 'grown-ups'. Here was a man asking interesting and important questions: in short, making the sort of films I would love to make, had I the talent.

Unsurprisingly then, this thesis has given me the opportunity to indulge my passion for Sayles' films, whilst at the same time researching the work of a man considered by me, and many others, to be the most influential, prolific and talented independent American filmmaker of the last twenty years.

The Reluctant Auteur

Auteur theory (discussed in Chapter One): "*emphasises the director as the major creator of film art, stamping the material with his or her personal style, vision and thematic obsessions*" (McDonnell, 1998, p. 8). In its purest form it supposes that meaning/s in film can be attributed to one person, an 'artist', normally the director, rather than viewing them as originating from collaborative commercial endeavour. However John Sayles does not self-identify as an

auteur. In his book *THINKING IN PICTURES: THE MAKING OF THE FILM MATEWAN*, under the heading "Collaboration", he writes:

Now that the screenplay section is past, you'll be hearing a lot less "I" and a lot more "we". This is not the royal we or the corporate we, but the collaborative we.. No matter how centralized control is on a movie, it is always a collaboration. Each performance is a collaboration between actor, screenwriter, director, cinematographer, editor, costumer and so on (Sayles, 1987, p. 43).

I agree with the above statement, with regard to the collaborative nature of film. However, I do not believe it discounts Sayles from auteur status. Authorial influence and the intentions of filmmakers are definitely more recognisable in some films than in others. The extent to which filmmakers exercise their own personal influence, and imbue their work with their political and social beliefs also varies from director to director. It is the contention of this thesis that John Sayles is a filmmaker who, via his multiple influences as director, scriptwriter, editor (and sometimes actor and songwriter) stamps his mark emphatically on his films.

His visual style has varied markedly from film to film, due to experience gained over the years, to what individual budgets will allow, and to what Sayles sees as being appropriate for the particular story he is telling. However, I believe that thematically there is a clear and consistent worldview represented in his films. Not a director prone to revisiting a site, either geographically, or in terms of subject matter, Sayles is a man of varied interests. He moves from one type of story material to another quite different, from one different location to another, all the while presenting the audience with a coherent, consistent set of values and view of life, one that is realistic, but offers no guarantees or pat solutions, yet is not pessimistic. It is a worldview born out of the 1960s, one that is primarily optimistic, one that situates individuals within society, with a responsibility not only towards themselves but also to the wider community and the world at large. It is a worldview that acknowledges that certain groups and individuals are privileged, by the nature of their position in society, and where those who are most fortunate have a responsibility to consider the concerns and desires of the less fortunate and to redress the balance of power where possible. It is a worldview which, sadly to me, seems at odds with the direction of much of today's political spirit and the ethos of individualism.

I recognise that the notion of "Auteur" is somewhat problematic in recent theorising in Film Studies, and while it is true that historical, cultural and ideological contexts cannot, and should not, be ignored, I contend in this thesis that Sayles' thoughtful, intelligent films cannot be viewed as anything other than his own creations. By his own admission, Sayles has specific personal and/or social and political conditions he wishes the audience to understand, specific questions he wants them to ponder. I will argue that not content with purely "telling a story" that can be read in numerous ways he, more than most directors, steers the audience (some complain not always subtly) in the direction of a "preferred reading" of his films.

A man for whom the intrinsic value of the work itself, rather than the potential for financial success, is the main incentive, Sayles has carved himself a place as a leading independent filmmaker. In the main he has worked outside the Hollywood studio system, preferring to deal with the financial constraints and challenges this brings, rather than compromising in any way the integrity of 'his' story, or the way he wishes to tell it. His determination to 'do it his way' has resulted in him being prepared to accept only the 'right' type of financial backing (that which comes without any demand for directorial or editorial control). Not prepared to have anyone else interfere with the stories he is telling, he is, however, writing, adapting, or tinkering with those being told by other people. He has long been a scriptwriter and script-doctor (a scriptwriter brought in by Producers to fix, or improve, a script written by another writer) for big budget studio projects and has financed much of his own work in this way. It has only been recently that he has become part of a deal with Sony Pictures Entertainment that allows him financial support from a studio without threatening the control he insists on retaining over his films. John Sayles is therefore, I believe, a very suitable candidate for an auteurist thesis at the beginning of the 21st century.

Research Parameters

The decision as to which films to include and which to leave out was made for a number of reasons, including pragmatism and emotion. I was unable to locate video copies of *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979), *Lianna* (1982), and *Baby, It's You* (1983) in New Zealand. I was able to view *Lianna*, once only, in Australia, and courtesy of the wonderful "Dr Whats" video store in Bondi Junction I was lucky enough to be able to access one of the few copies of *Baby, It's You* available for hire. *Hombres Armados/ Men With Guns* (1997) is now available; however, that was not the case when I first began researching. I chose to exclude *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994) as it is Sayles' only children's film and as such does not in my view 'fit' readily with the remainder of his films, which are pitched at an adult audience.

Thesis Structure

This thesis comprises Five Chapters. Chapter One deals with Auteur theory, briefly outlining the history of the theory, the changes it has been through, and finally focusing on its current form. It also locates John Sayles within that tradition, via brief identification of the major themes, issues and characters running through his films. The next three chapters explore these themes, issues and characters in depth. The Second Chapter, for instance, concerns itself with History and Geography, Chapter Three focuses on Class, Community and Politics, and the Fourth Chapter deals with Relationships and what I will refer to as The Journey (that path which needs to be travelled in order for the character/s involved to learn and grow throughout the film). Chapters Two to Four not only identify common threads in the treatment of these themes and issues, but illustrate the way/s in which these consistencies contribute to the

formation of a clear worldview. Chapter Five comprises the Conclusion and as such summarises the Sayles World. Immediately following the Conclusion there is a filmography and plot synopses (for the films researched for this thesis).

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Preface	iv
Table of Contents	viii
Chapter One - The Auteur Theory	1
Chapter Two - History and Geography: How they Interact With Individuals and Communities	12
Chapter Three – Communities, Class and Work	38
Chapter Four - Relationships and Steps in the 'Life-Long Journey'	75
Chapter Five - Conclusion	107
Filmography and Plot Synopses of Films Researched for this Thesis	114
Select Bibliography	130

Chapter One

Auteur Theory

The History of the Theory

Autorenfilm/Auteur and Politique des Auteurs

The Auteur theory, as applied to film, has had a chequered history, waxing and waning in popularity and perceived relevance since the terms '*Autorenfilm*' (author's film – German) and 'Auteur' were first coined in relation to film in the first two decades of the 20th Century (Hayward, 2000, p. 19). Even then there was debate as to whether in order to be considered an Auteur, a director had merely to direct his/her films, or whether he/she had to be the originator of the screenplay also. In the main it was used to refer to those filmmakers who did both.

It was in the 1950s that the theory really took flight, with the emergence of the *politique des auteurs*, courtesy of the French journal, *Cahiers du Cinema*. The emphasis of the *politique* was on director 'as artist' by virtue of his/her control of, and expression through, mise-en-scène. This focus allowed those directors, who were not also the writers of their films, to become eligible for consideration as Auteurs. There were theorists, André Bazin for example, who not only disagreed with this definition, but questioned whether or not it was even the director's role to attempt to create or influence meaning. Bazin advocated the notion of director as a neutral recorder of events, as someone who rather than trying to impose his/her personality, beliefs and world-view, purely recorded in a non-judgmental, non-selective manner events occurring before him/her. He saw it as the director's responsibility to remove, as much as possible, any trace of himself/herself from the film.

Sarris, the Auteur Theory and Structuralism

Almost a decade later, American Andrew Sarris came out strongly on the side of the *politique*, taking it further with what he termed the Auteur Theory. He supported the notion that a director could take credit for the meanings associated with a film, even if he/she had not written it. Further, he proposed that the truly great Auteurs were in fact those who worked with material written by others, in an environment that was hostile to personal creativity, and who nevertheless managed to make films that clearly bore their individual 'mark'. Sarris's theory opened the way for the study of many directors so far ignored by serious researchers, directors who had worked primarily in the Hollywood system and were thus often considered as belonging more to the commercial world, than to the artistic one.

According to Andrew Sarris there are three premises to Auteur Theory. Firstly, he states that for a director to be considered truly an auteur, he, or she, must be able to withstand the close scrutiny of their technical skills, i.e. he or she must be technically competent. Secondly he says:

Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks or moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels (in Braudy and Cohen, 1999, p. 516).

Thirdly, Sarris refers to the 'internal meaning' created by the director, something which he describes as being akin to the transmission of the director's personality, his or her worldview to the film. He states that this creation of internal meaning is possible even when the ideas or themes expressed in the film may not have originated with the director.

Structuralist critics of the time challenged textual researchers to investigate the '*relationships within and between cultural objects*' (Cook and Bernink, 1999, p. 282-283), when looking for the origin of meaning in any given text. Rather than individuals being attributed with meaning creation, it was the system within which these individuals functioned which Structuralism credited with truly being

responsible for making meanings. As Foucault and Barthes heralded '*the death of the author*', arguing against the notion of individual agency, there were those who attempted to combine structuralism with auteur study. Auteur-Structuralists, such as Sarris, furthered the cause of Auteur theory, according to Hayward:

By situating the auteur as one structure among others – such as the notion of genre and the film industry producing meaning, the theory would yield to a greater flexibility (Hayward, 1999, p. 25).

Cook and Bernink (1999, p. 299) do point out, however, that although Auteur-Structuralism encouraged the notion of the director as one, rather than the only, creator of meaning, it did not give equal value to the different structures it explored, favouring the auteur above others.

Post-Structuralism

Post-Structuralism's rise in the 1970s saw this creation-of-meaning debate further expanded with the introduction of notions of audience and ideology into the equation. Post-Structuralists criticised Structuralists for ignoring the role of the viewer, believing that viewers 'decoded' texts and that they did not always arrive at the 'preferred reading'. British Cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggested that viewers might accept part, but only part, of the 'preferred reading', thus arriving at a 'negotiated reading', or they may choose an 'oppositional reading', one totally contrary to the 'preferred reading' (in Hall et al, 1980, p. 128 -138).

Auteurism Today

As is probably fitting today, in the alleged era of the Post-Modern, the Auteur Theory is best viewed in the plural, rather than as one theory . It "*is not a unified critical practice*" (Cook and Bernink, 1999, p. 313).

Whilst Structuralism and Post-Structuralism have sought to debunk the notion that one person can be considered the total creator of meaning in film, they

have not been successful in totally discrediting the value of the creative input of the director. One point on which most agree is that, in order to be effective, auteur study needs to be carried out over a body of work, rather than on an individual film-by-film basis. It is only by studying a number of films that patterns and consistencies can be recognised and evaluated, thus leading in certain cases to; *"the identification of directors as 'auteurs' "* (Cook and Bernink, 1999, p. 314).

For those interested in directorial influences, and the way in which they create meaning, there are numerous auteur hybrids that can be utilised, each offering a slightly different focus. There is also a plethora of books (some more academically focussed than others) published about the lives and times of popular directors (including Oliver Stone, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Spike Lee, and Francis Coppola). Each of these books indicates that certain directors are still, for whatever reason, deemed to be, at the very least, central to the production of meaning in some films and, as such, worthy of 'knowing'. Many of these books view their subjects romantically, elevating them to the status of omnific artist, others are a little more restrained. Frank Beaver's foreword to Jay Boyer's book on Sidney Lumet, for example, states:

A collective art, the motion picture has nevertheless allowed individual genius to flourish in all its artistic and technical areas: directing, screenwriting, cinematography, acting, editing.

He goes on to say:

Many studies are auteur-orientated and elucidate the work of individual directors whose ideas and cinematic styles make them authors of their films (Boyer, 1993, p. ix).

Beaver appears comfortable using the word 'genius', yet is also careful to locate the director within the production framework, thus acknowledging and accommodating a common criticism levelled at Auteurism.

The Auteurial 'Team' and Non-Directorial Auteurs

When attributing the making of meaning to one person, in what is clearly a group endeavour, the efforts and contributions of the remainder of the group are relegated to a secondary status. Academy Award winning scriptwriter William Goldman states that there are seven people crucial to the making of a film and its associated meanings. He names as crucial to the process: the actor, the cameraman, the director, the editor, the producer, the production designer and the writer, and that to discount any is both incorrect and insulting (Goldman, 1985, p. 101-105).

At first it appears Goldman seems to be suggesting that he is decrying the total concept of the Auteur. It soon becomes apparent, however, that his objection derives not from any desire to see influences outside the filmmaking process included in any discussion regarding meaning, but from a desire to have it recognised that meaning emanates from a group within that process, rather than just one person. When Goldman asks about the contribution of the cinematographer, or editor (1985, p. 101), he does so not to destroy the theory, but to demand their inclusion in it.

Many directors, John Sayles included, not only acknowledge but value the contribution to the creative process.

Each performance is a collaboration between actor, screenwriter, director, cinematographer, editor, costumer, and so on. The way Ingrid Bergman was dressed, made up, lit, shot and supported by background music in "Casablanca" were all integral to her performance. Nobody else could have delivered that performance quite like her, but it was the result of a collaboration (Sayles, 1987, p. 43 & 45).

It is also worth noting that amongst those who believe that is possible for one person to be responsible for the creation of meaning in a film, there is debate concerning who that person is. The term auteur has been, and still can be, used to refer to the scriptwriter, an actor (Corliss, R. in Mast et al, 1992, p. 608-613),

or the producer. In the main, however, the term and the theory are used in relation to the director.

Despite the difficulties and varieties of approach, some version of the director-as-author position remains probably the most widely shared assumption in film studies today. Most critical studies of cinema put the director at centre stage (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997, p. 39).

Auteur and Genre

Just as the theory has often not allowed for the power of the actor or the scriptwriter to contribute to the creation of meaning, it does not, as Edward Buscombe points out, tend to value the role of the expectations created by the traditions of various genres. In not doing so, it does not allow for the impact of these expectations on the creation of meaning (in Grant B.K (ed.), 1995, p. 20).

However, in his book *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz contends that auteur theory and genre study are not mutually exclusive:

These two critical methods do complement and counterbalance one another in that genre criticism treats established cinematic forms, whereas auteur criticism celebrates certain filmmakers who worked effectively within those forms (Schatz, 1981, p. 8).

The Celebrity Auteur and Commerce and Auteurism

The American film magazine *Premiere*, November 1994, contains an article by Peter Biskind entitled "AN AUTEUR IS BORN". The auteur in question is Quentin Tarantino, a director who at that time had directed only two feature length films (the first in 1992), whilst having scripted, co-scripted or acted in several others. Tarantino did not have, at the time, the history in filmmaking that normally goes hand-in-hand with consideration for auteur status. The article therefore does not have a 'body' of work to discuss, but seems not to be worried by this, describing Tarantino as "*the real thing*" and referring to the "*Quentinization of Hollywood*" (p. 96). What the subject of the article does have is a

'personality'. His unorthodox behaviour, his directness (looking, to this particular reader, more like rudeness masquerading as honesty), his underprivileged childhood, all are made much of. Quotes such as: "*THE ATTITUDE I GREW UP WITH WAS THAT EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD IS LIES*" are highlighted. Tarantino as 'bad boy' is celebrated. He is a 'star' auteur.

The article seems to suggest that any film made by him would have to be worthwhile, purely by virtue of his personality. It confirms Timothy Corrigan's assertion that some auteur study has become focussed on the personality of the director (Corrigan, 1991, p. 105).

[The auteur] *can be viewed as an expressive artist whose creative work is shaped or molded by the economics of the marketplace* (Wyatt, 1996, p. 53).

Economic realities have always, and will always, impact on filmmaking. A lack of money can be considered to impact badly on a production, limiting the use of more expensive shots (crane shots for example), restricting the number of locations used and ruling out expensive special effects. On the other hand, a restricted budget can foster creativity, necessity being the mother of invention, as per Sarris's third premise of auteur theory.

Timothy Corrigan finds auteur theory to be wanting when it comes to: "*recontextualizing* [the discussions surrounding the theory] *within industrial and commercial trajectories*" (1991, p. 103). The auteur has the potential to (as exemplified by the previous discussion on Tarantino) become a performer, their performance influencing the meanings attributed to their films, who reads them and how they are read. Their performances, if large enough and strong enough, may even allow for their films to be known and discussed, without actually being seen, for it is they that give them meaning, rather than the text they create. Thus their contribution to the making of meaning may come as much from non film-making activities, as it does from those directly involved in the filmmaking process.

Sayles as Auteur

As previously stated, John Sayles is not a filmmaker who claims auteur status, the credits of his films never heralding "A John Sayles Film". When asked about the latter, he commented during a workshop in March 1998 at Auckland University, that this is because films are a collaborative process and never the work of one person. Sayles' self-perception should not, of course however, preclude him from auteurial study. The control he exerts over his films is recognised by admirers and critics alike, as can be seen from the introduction to J. Nowitzky's 1999 review of *Limbo*:

It is well known that John Sayles demands complete control of his films. Therefore it is only fair to blame the writer-director-editor for the huge mess he has created in "Limbo".....John Sayles' tight grip on every aspect of "Limbo" equals a monstrosity of a movie (p. 1).

Whilst in no way agreeing with Jennifer Nowitzky's opinion of the film, I do agree with her when she credits this writer-director-editor with overall control and responsibility for the finished product.

The argument of this thesis will identify the way in which Sayles fulfils Sarris's three premises of an autuer, with particular emphasis on the third, the way in which Sayles' worldview is indelibly woven into the fabric of his films. It will: 1) note his technical competence and the way in which his style reflects his personal views; 2) it will identify the Sayles world, via the themes and issues that recur in his body of work; and 3) it will also discuss ideology and the way in which Sayles, not always subtly, steers viewers towards a preferred reading, not one that involves answers, but that instead focuses on encouraging specific questions.

John Sayles: Self-Identifying, Working-Class Visionary

John Sayles was born on September 28th 1950, the second son of two educators. His family moved regularly when he was a child and he was brought up in various areas of upstate New York. Although from a middle-class family,

the areas in which he lived and in which he went to public school were strongly working-class. His friends came from working-class families, many of their fathers working in local factories. When Sayles is asked which of his films contains the most autobiographical content, he is quick to reply that, although he does not consider any of his work truly autobiographical, those which are nearest his own experience are *Baby, It's You* and *City of Hope* (Smith, G. 1998. Pages 28-29), two of his most noticeably working-class films.

Sayles left his blue-collar environment to attend Williams College (Massachusetts) in 1968, but repositioned himself in a working class environment, when, having completed his degree, he worked as a hospital orderly, a meat packer and a labourer. It is apparent from his latest film, *Limbo*, that he still self-identifies as working-class some 30 years later.

Having majored in psychology at Williams College, Sayles' interest in people, in particular with the way they interact with each other, with their environment and their history, is also still evident throughout his films.

I was much more of a believer in behaviorism, in B.F. Skinner and that crowd, than I was in Freud, even though Freud was more attractive because his theories were wonderful stories. I don't believe that any social animal, including human beings, evolve/live/grow/exist outside their connections with other things. They do things in reaction to each other (Sayles in Smith (ed.), 1998, p. 74).

He [Skinner] made a special contribution by repeatedly pointing out that the social and physical conditions of our environments are critically important in determining our behaviors (Nye, 1992, p. 49).

John Sayles' films are infused with the above credo. It is a way of viewing the world in which individuals, communities and entire countries need to learn to see themselves, not in isolation, but as part of the bigger picture, part of a system in which for every action, there is a reaction. It is a credo he chooses to

explore, in the main, through the stories of working-class men and women and their communities. His characters never operate in isolation, they are always struggling to deal with what has gone before, what is occurring currently, and the physical environment that surrounds them. Sayles' characters are works in progress, and very few are happy when the viewer first meets them. Those who change and become happier by film's end, do so in reaction to external factors.

Sayles' vision, his 'ideal world', is a world in which the aforementioned "*cause and effect connections*" are recognised, and decisions and life choices are thus made on the basis of more than purely self-interest. It is a world where the potential repercussions of actions on others are given full and serious consideration and in which the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' work together. A world where the privileged have a responsibility to assist the less fortunate, but not the right to dictate to them in a paternalistic manner. It is a world to which knowledge holds the key, encouraging informed decision-making, as opposed to that which arises from blissful ignorance and often results in more problems than it solves.

Always the pragmatist, Sayles appears to accept the imperfections and frailties of the human condition and, via the characters he creates, he encourages individuals, groups and nations to do the best they can in the circumstances. Recently part of a fact-finding delegation that travelled to East and West Timor to investigate the refugee situation there, he wrote an article that appeared in the *Austin Chronicle*. With reference to the investigation of atrocities and to making those responsible pay for their crimes he wrote:

We should not be surprised if some of the worst perpetrators walk in this highly charged political situation. Because the process is as important as the results. Better an honest process that leaves a couple of fish unfried than an autocratic sacrifice of a few colonels to protect business as usual (2000).

This same pragmatic attitude is evident in many of the characters in his films. Wynn in *City of Hope* and Sam Deeds in *Lone Star* are but two examples of this. Sayles' vision for individuals is the same as his vision for large complex

communities, including for America itself. It is a vision that involves the recognition of the inevitability of being connected to the rest of the world and the acceptance of the responsibilities this brings, responsibilities that include considering and including others when decision-making.

Sayles makes it clear in his films (particularly in *Limbo* where he creates a community of locals disempowered by outsiders dictating to them) that he does not see these responsibilities as founded on a base of paternalism, a 'we know better than you what is good for you' attitude. Instead he desires that these responsibilities be located in a desire to work with and assist equals. He does not see individuals, or America for that matter, as functioning effectively on a 'big brother' basis, and constantly challenges the right, and ability, of individuals to make appropriate decisions that affect others' lives, without consulting them.

If there is one word which describes Sayles' beliefs, as demonstrated by his films, it is the word reconciliation: reconciliation with the past, reconciliation with the physical environment, reconciliation with different communities and social classes, and, via connection with others, reconciliation with self. This reconciliation is available to individuals, communities and entire countries. In the next three chapters, we will examine the ways in which Sayles illustrates his world, starting with his treatment of the historical and environmental factors.